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Report of

FREDERICK LAW OLMSTED

and

JOHN NOLEN

Expert Landscape Architects

on

Civic Center

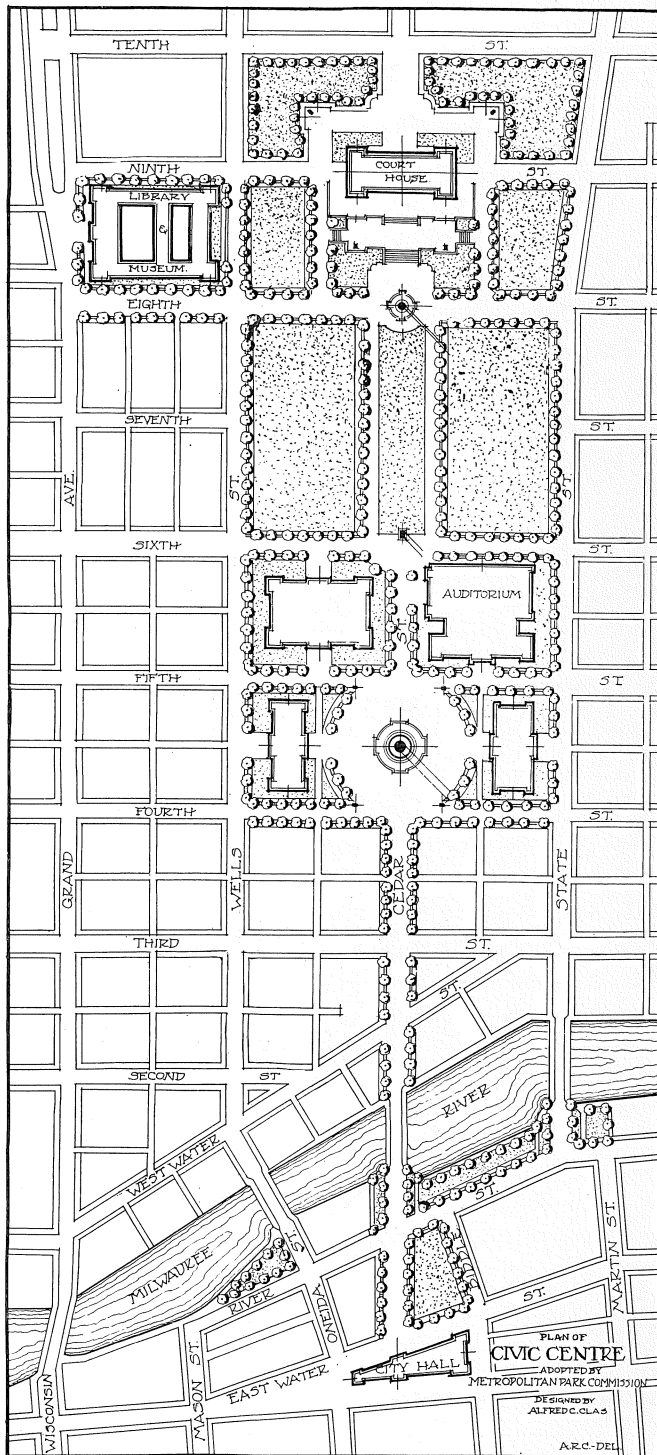
as proposed by the

**Metropolitan
Park Commission**

City of Milwaukee

July 27th, 1909

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To the Special Committee on New Court House of the Board of Supervisors of Milwaukee County: and to the Metropolitan Park Commission of Milwaukee:

Milwaukee, Wis., July 27th, 1909.

The Undersigned, having at your request examined the plans of a civic center for Milwaukee prepared under the direction of the Metropolitan Park Commission, respectfully submit the following summary of conclusions and suggestions.

It is needless to enumerate the general advantages of the location, because all of these have been discussed at length and are familiar.

So far as concerns the practical question of comparison with any possible alternative site, such disadvantages as are peculiar to the site proposed are emphatically outweighed, in our opinion, by its manifest advantages, notably its proximity to the business center combined with the economy of purchase, a visual relationship to the City Hall, and an arrangement of grades favorable to a fine, artistic composition.

As to the general proposition, therefore, of grouping the principal future public buildings about an open space or spaces arranged on the axis of Cedar Street, between the crest of the hill at Ninth Street and the City Hall, we can only congratulate the community upon the existence of such an opportunity and urgently advise that it be not lost by delay.

As to the working out of this general proposition, in the plan which we have been asked to review, we understand that the details are not now under consideration; but that you wish our opinion in respect to those controlling features of the plan that must be taken into account in determining the boundaries of the land purchases, and the location and design of the County Building and the treatment of its immediate setting. To place the County Building at the west end of the composition on the axis of Cedar Street, as proposed, seems to us admirable. The termination of the Civic Center axis at one end in the City Hall and at the other end in the County Buildings not only brings the two principal buildings into direct visual relation with each other, but emphasizes their predominance in the group. The fact that the intersection of Ninth Street and Cedar, although approachable from

Grand Avenue and State Street on nearly level grades is 45 feet above the general level of the land to the east, offers the possibility of a commanding site, which, if skilfully treated, will have a notable distinction and impressiveness.

Our chief criticism, indeed, of the plan as drawn, so far as concerns the proposed site of the County Building, is that it fails to suggest the full possibilities of the situation. In many respects, the site may be said to resemble that of the United States Capitol. There, as here, in approaching from the city by street cars or other vehicles, people ascend the hill to the right or the left of the main axis and enter the building from the upper level, while the direct access by people on foot is by means of the steps and terraces on the opposite side, terraces which add enormously to the architectural effect of the building as seen from the lower ground and which in turn command a most important outlook over the space below them. The elevation of the building upon such a system of terraces will not only contribute greatly to its effect as seen from the rest of the Civic Center, but is very important in respect to its appearance as seen from the west. To place it so that it might appear "down in hole" as approached along its main axis on Cedar Street from the growing western part of the city, would be a serious misfortune. Indeed it is probable that the large majority of people will approach it by Ninth Street from the Grand Avenue or the State Street cars, so that a suitable relation of the level of the building to the high ground on the west side is of vital importance.

We feel, therefore, that the treatment of the whole space from Wells to State Street at this end of the proposed civic center should be carefully studied with a view to obtaining every possible advantage of the differences in level; further, we believe that this study should accompany and, in a measure, control the preliminary studies for the design of the County Building, itself, and that it should include provision for probable future increase in the accommodations offered by the building now to be erected, either in the form of additional flanking buildings, or in the form of large wings. When it is considered that the population of Milwaukee is doubling about every twenty-five years, which means an increase of four hundred per cent. in about fifty years, and that a fine public building or a fine Civic Center may be expected to endure for centuries so far as the physical permanence of the investment is concerned, it would seem extremely short-sighted not to plan the treatment of the County Building and the space around it with a deliberate expecta-

tion of providing in the future, without having to tear and rebuild, an accommodation many times larger than is now needed by the county. This means that ultimately the county buildings would occupy practically the whole of the space from Wells to State Street at the end of the scheme, that the terraces and open spaces ought now to be designed with a view to such extension, and that a more liberal purchase of land by the county is justifiable than would be required merely to give a decent setting to the large Court House now under consideration.

All the above points, but especially a regard for the importance of the approach to the building by Ninth Street and the great desirability of bringing it into view from Grand Avenue, incline us to believe that the best results would be secured by placing the building fairly and squarely on the plateau at the intersection of Ninth and Cedar Streets and purchasing for county purposes the four blocks bounded by State, Wells, Eighth and Tenth Streets. The only serious objection to this as a matter of design apart from the question of cost, appears to be the obstruction of Ninth Street, which is the first street west of Fourth Street that offers a connection north from Grand Avenue on a nearly level grade. It is to be considered, however, that Ninth Street does not extend south of Grand Avenue, and is interrupted on the north at Winnebago Street. Unless this interruption of Ninth Street is found to be out of the question or the increased cost of land purchase is prohibitive, we recommend the modification of the plan above outlined placing the County Building on the intersection of Ninth Street and Cedar Street.

Assuming the location of the County Building at Ninth and Cedar Streets and, of course, the City Hall at the East end of the Cedar Street axis, the problem remains of how best to place the other buildings, and what size and shape to give to the open spaces, for the latter need to be as carefully designed as the former. The two most serious limitations upon the development of the most thoroughly satisfactory design consist in the monotonous division of the area into city blocks and in the size and location of the new auditorium.

If all streets are carried unbroken across the composition, they will not only divide it monotonously but will make it impossible to so place any of the features of the design as to be seen from Grand Avenue by looking down the connecting streets. Sixth, Fifth and Fourth Streets—on account of their connections and

relatively easy grades have too much traffic importance to allow of interruption. Eighth Street has a steep gradient and it would be desirable to place some feature in connection with the terraces rising west of Eighth Street, such as an outstanding basin and fountain, for example, so as to project into the line of Eighth Street. The roadway would be merely deflected around that feature in crossing the Cedar Street axis. Of still more importance, as regards the beauty of the composition, if it can possibly be accomplished, would be the closing of Seventh Street from Wells to State. This, together with the substitution of a broad parking with a roadway on either side in place of the single axial roadway of Cedar Street between Sixth and Eighth, would afford an impressive and unbroken open space of suitable shape and scale in front of the County Building and would permit the ultimate construction of public buildings of agreeable proportion to flank this open space on the north and south. The fact that the arrangement would make the buildings visible from Grand Avenue is an additional gain.

Seventh Street has been suggested as a route for an additional street car line, but it would seem as though Fifth or Sixth Street, or at most, both of them would suffice. The needless multiplication of trolley lines across the design ought to be avoided at all hazards. Moreover, a car line on the main axis, such as now exists between Fifth and Sixth streets, is very undesirable and it would seem as though the east and west connections could be made wholly on Wells and State streets; both of which can and should be widened in connection with the formation of the Civic Center. Wells and State Streets should not only be widened throughout the blocks acquired by the public so as to leave sidewalks adequate for the maintenance of trees, as well as ample roadways, but the necessary steps should be taken to insure the rebuilding of the opposite frontage in a manner that will harmonize with the character of the Civic Center. The most effective means of securing these ends would be for the public to acquire these frontages.

The auditorium makes impossible a continuation of the broad treatment of the main open space east of Sixth Street. We therefore recommend for the blocks from Sixth to Fourth Streets an arrangement substantially like the one proposed by the Metropolitan Park Commission, but with these changes: (1) the inclusion of the land fronting on Fourth Street from Wells to State, without which a dignified and satisfactory enclosure of the civic

center is hardly possible; (2) the reduction of the size of the circular paved space between Fifth and Fourth Streets.

East of Fourth Street, upon the reasonable assumption that Cedar Street cannot be widened, it would seem desirable to widen the sidewalks at the expense of the needlessly broad roadway and to introduce sidewalk trees as shown on the plan; but it is essential that those trees should not be of large growing species, or the vista through to the City Hall would in time be blocked by them. East of the river again the space between the Cedar Street axis and the existing large buildings of the Power House and the Theatre ought to be kept open as gardens rather than left to be built up as suggested by the plan.

In conclusion, our judgment is that the general situation proposed by the Metropolitan Park Commission would permit of an orderly, advantageous and economical grouping of public and semi-public buildings; that the plan of development proposed is, in its essentials, admirable; and yet that the project is of such complexity that the best results are to be secured only by means of the most thorough and skilful study applied to the revision and development of the plan as a working project - a revision and development that can best be accomplished by the co-operation of a group of designers working out the various parts of the problem, one in harmony with the other.

Respectfully submitted,

FREDERICK LAW OLMSTED.

JOHN NOLEN.